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ANNALS OF WAR

VIETNAM

IV—JOHNSON'S DILEMMA

BEFORE the dry season of 1965 ended, the Johnson Administration had taken those steps necessary to transform a holding action against the National Liberation Front into a major war involving North and South Vietnam. The American intervention in force did not rest on any single decision, nor was it a reaction to any unforeseen circumstance. As early as 1961, General Maxwell Taylor and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had predicted that American ground troops would be needed to preserve the Saigon government. President Kennedy resisted that final commitment, but from 1961 on the American buildup in Vietnam proceeded steadily with a series of incremental decisions. In February, 1964, a few months after the fall of President Ngo Dinh Diem, the Johnson Administration authorized the covert bombing of Laos near the North Vietnamese border and increased its program of secret intelligence and sabotage missions inside North Vietnam. In response to an amphibious sabotage raid in the Gulf of Tonkin by South Vietnamese forces, North Vietnamese PT boats, in August, attacked the American destroyer Maddox, mistaking it for one of the belligerent South Vietnamese vessels. The Administration portrayed this incident as an example of North Vietnamese aggression, and sent Congress a resolution authorizing the use of American force in Southeast Asia—a resolution American officials had drafted two months earlier. By September, 1964, during the Presidential campaign in which Johnson ran as the candidate who opposed an enlargement of the war, Administration officials had come to what historians who prepared the Pentagon Papers called a "general consensus" on the bombing of North Vietnam. The bombing was ordered in February, 1965, and in March the first American ground combat troops were landed in Danang.

In their history of American decision-making during this period, the Pentagon historians have shown that, apart from George Ball, no high Administration official came out against the general policy of intervention to save the Saigon government. The issues debated within the Administration were merely those of strategy and timing. Certain officials—principally the Joint Chiefs of Staff—urged that the President pursue a schedule of rapid escalation. Those whose views prevailed advised a slow and carefully orchestrated campaign combining a gradual increase of force with diplomatic initiatives that would signal to the North Vietnamese the strength of American resolve to go as far as was necessary. Interestingly, few, if any, of the proponents of the gradualist approach had confidence that such a strategy would deter the North Vietnamese from (in Dean Rusk's phrase) "doing what they were doing." Estimates prepared by the Central Intelligence Agency were uniformly pessimistic, and at no point were high officials deceived about the results of their actions. By the beginning of 1965, virtually all the high Administration officials had faced the prospect of a commitment of United States ground troops. Throughout this period, Johnson gave cryptic indications of his plans but concealed the official doubts about their potential effectiveness. The picture of Johnson the Pentagon history presents is that of a President constantly pushed forward by the tempo of events in Vietnam and constantly hanging back from the final commitment out of domestic political considerations. Politically, Johnson faced a dilemma. On the one hand, he, like his predecessors, judged the "loss" of Vietnam to be irreconcilable with American security interests and unacceptable to the American public. On the other hand, he had no reason to expect immediate success for his policy and felt that the American public would be reluctant to support another ground war in Asia. His political strategy was therefore to conceal his doubts about the outcome of the policy while attempting to convince the public of the necessity for the war.

THE early military results of Johnson's policy promised anything but a quick end to the war. Progress could only be claimed in negative terms. General William C. Westmoreland, the American commander, claimed that his troops had "defeated a concentrated North Vietnamese effort to cut the country in two." What this phrase meant was difficult to say, as the National Liberation Front had already "cut the country in two," in the sense that it controlled most of the central-Vietnamese countryside and had confined the Saigon government to air traffic between the province capitals. On the other hand, a military occupation of the northernmost cities did not seem a likely strategy for the N.L.F., given the weight of American air power in support of the G.V.N.—as Americans usually referred to the South Vietnamese regime. About all that could be said was that the presence of American troops had staved off total defeat for the Saigon government. Still, despite their less than decisive performance, the American troops brought a surge of optimism to the American Mission in Saigon. The Embassy officials and military advisers were not concerned, after all, with the long-range goals of United States policy but, rather, with their own appointed task of saving the Saigon government. As

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